

The Vision of the Dead

A SERMON



GEORGE A. GORDON

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A SERMON

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REV. GEORGE A. GORDON, D.D.

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THIS SERMON
WHICH IS A HINT TOWARD THE
SOLUTION OF THE
GRAVEST OF ALL PROBLEMS
IS OFFERED IN
EVER-DEEPENING RESPECT AND LOVE
TO THE PEOPLE OF THE OLD SOUTH CHURCH
BY WHOM IT WAS HEARD
AND AT WHOSE REQUEST
IT IS PRINTED

THE VISION OF THE DEAD

“And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God.” —
REV. XX. 12.

THIS is the great Christian seer's vision of the dead. It was indeed a momentous experience that he embodied in these words. Behind the vision beats his new passion for righteousness, back of it lies his profound Christian interest in man, his wonder as to what becomes of him after death, his longing to know what relation all souls here and everywhere bear to the Infinite Soul. His serious concern for man, his sense of the tragedy in man's history, the burden of his heart as he thinks of the world as it is, and then upon the God and Father of Jesus Christ, — all lie behind this vision.

The vision itself is full of seriousness and reserve. It is not a shallow optimism, shouting itself hoarse over the certainty of universal salvation, while it has no word of rebuke for present rampant iniquity. It is not that. It is full of awe as itself in the presence of God. Neither is it, on the other hand, a map of heaven and hell. It has no details for the curious imagination. It is full of dignity, it is under great reserve. It

sees one sublime and infinite thing, the whole universe filled with the being of God, the entire human world rolled up into the presence of God. It is the vision of one supreme thing, the dead — all the dead, the dead significant and insignificant — standing before God.

The great Christian seer's right to his vision is stamped upon it. He is himself in the stress of the moral process. He is himself doing battle for righteousness; he is fighting for surer standing in the truth of Christ and the esteem of God. He has but one interest for himself and the world, — Christian righteousness. All other needs are as nothing when set beside this. And because he is ever keeping in view this end of righteousness, because his love for it grows deeper the longer he serves it and suffers for it, because he feels himself in his moral victories and hopes, in his Christian experiences and expectations, getting, as it were, into the great current of God's redemptive movement in human history, he desires to speculate, that is, to look beyond himself to see, if he can, how it fares with the whole. He feels that because he is seeking personal righteousness and doing what he can to destroy the works of the devil, he has a right to lift his eyes to the Highest and ask how it fares with the dead. His wide thinking comes up out of the energy of his personal struggle to be a Christian, and upon his

personal struggle to be a Christian the wide thinking returns to greaten his heart.

All these conditions must unite to qualify us for this vision of the dead. There must lie back of the vision a Christian interest in man. Man's sin must be recognized, his need of moral deliverance and the serious peril of his condition. There must be sympathy with man, and a passionate wonder as to his deepest relation to God. When your child is sick you turn away the curiosity of an enemy. You cannot gratify a frivolous friend; you demand sympathy, profound and eager, before you can tell your sorrow. The vision is not for the inhuman soul, nor for the frivolous heart; it is for the spirit burdened with fear, with hope, and full of love.

And the vision must not run out into wild detail. Human certainties of universal salvation, in a world as wicked as this is, are tremendous dogmatisms. If it is true, as it certainly is, that no wise general will fight without a good prospect of success, it is equally true that no wise general will boast of his victory before it is won. He will go into the battle believing that he is to conquer, hoping that his fears may all prove to be groundless; but he will defer the display of bunting and the booming of cannon until the fight is over. A similar dignity and reserve should characterize every disciple of Christ. He should

share the confidence of his Master : “ I saw Satan as lightning fall from heaven ; ” he should also share his reserve : “ Are there few that be saved ? ” “ Enter ye in at the strait gate. ” It is self-evident that only as we believe in the possible defeat of wickedness, only as we are confident of the possible triumph of righteousness, shall we enter the great conflict with heart and hope ; and it is likewise self-evident that if we are wise we shall not in advance of the issue of the battle shout our triumphs from the house-top. We shall not despair of the overwhelming majority of our fellow men with one scheme, nor shall we rush them all into heaven with another. We shall simply clear the deck of our ship for action ; we shall try to discern through the din and smoke of our own cannonade the roar of the whole fleet ; we shall believe that the universal conflict between righteousness and unrighteousness is on, and we shall contend that it is possible that the Christian side may win. We shall add in Luther’s words the historic ground of our confidence : —

“ Did we in our own strength confide,
Our striving would be losing ;
Were not the right man on our side
The man of God’s own choosing.
Dost ask who that may be ?
Christ Jesus, it is He ;
Lord Sabaoth is His name,
From age to age the same,
And He must win the battle.”

Nor must our interest in this high theme be mere speculation. We have no business with opinions upon the conflict of truth with error, unless we are doing battle on the side of truth. We have no right to the Christian vision of the dead, unless we are living in the strength of the Christian vision for ourselves. We have no title to hope for the world so long as we are without God, and therefore without hope for our own life. Only as we ourselves stand in the stress of the Christian life are we justified in looking abroad upon the fortunes of our kind. Only as we rejoice in the secret of the Lord, and long to impart it to the world, how great soever the cost may be to ourselves, is it legitimate for us to wonder how it fares with the innumerable dead. Intellectual interest in the relation of the race to God that springs out of a heart morally dead is as barren as the desert. The men who are without a prevailing interest in righteousness have no more right to be in at the discussion of high Christian themes than Satan had to present himself among the sons of God. It was a great Greek philosopher, a man with an eye for truth and a boundless feeling for reality, who first insisted that for the fruitful study of the science of morality it was indispensable that men should have moral purpose and some moral experience. Under the protection of such authority, it is surely

justifiable for the preacher of righteousness to contend that so long as a man is not himself fighting for a Christian character he is unfit for a share in the Christian vision of the dead. But with the great seer's experience, with his noble dignity and reserve, and with his rigorous use of the wide outlook as an inspiration to ever greater moral strenuousness, I think we may profit by his vision.

1. We learn from the vision that all the dead are in the presence of God. That phrase, "the small and the great," is full of tenderness and humanity. No one is great except through his everlasting relation to God ; and no one is really small who is bound by that indissoluble tie. How infinitely dear the words of the text must be to those who have lost children, and to those who take a deep interest in the child-life of the world. And how vast this class is can be readily imagined, when it is remembered that in each generation about one half the human race die in infancy. How many darkened homes there are in every generation ; how overwhelming the sum of them in all the generations. What is the fortune of all these little ones, who came and looked, with eyes of wonder and trust, into a few beloved faces ? They had no language but a cry ; speechless they came and speechless they went. They were of no value for this wild world. What has

become of this unnumbered multitude of infant souls? Were they too small for conservation, too insignificant for the survival of death? Are we to think of one half the human race as thus annihilated at death? Are the dead children of the world no more? Are they dear only to the fanatical father, to the wild fondness of the mother? Do the lives that perish early lose all opportunity? They were forbidden to go on here; are they forbidden to go on elsewhere, crowded back against the protesting cry of helpless innocence, — the cry that is the most pathetic and moving thing in all the world, — into the blackness of eternal night? This vision of the dead says, No. The little ones go on; they are very small, but they are gathered about the throne; they are so very tiny, so greatly overshadowed, but still they make way for themselves. They have no history, but they have an endless opportunity. They have no place in the memory of the world, but they stand before God.

Then there are the multitudes of insignificant lives. When on an ocean voyage a poor stoker dies, at once and without ceremony or ritual of any kind —

“ His heavy-shotted hammock-shroud
Drops in his vast and wandering grave.”

And the poor sailor represents the overwhelming majority: while they live they are hardly counted; they are used as things and not as men, and when

they die nothing stops. The great world, like the great steamer, does not even slacken its speed. These uncounted thousands who toil in the depths in ship and in mine, who sow and reap in all the valleys and on all the hillsides of the globe, who weave in factories all good and costly fabrics, and who carry them to the ends of the earth, — how little note of them the world takes. Think of the service that is required to keep a city clean, to keep it in light and in repair, to keep it safe and comfortable, to make it even a little more beautiful from decade to decade. Think of the activity requisite to keep our country going, the toil indispensable to the continuance of an empire like Great Britain. Her civil service at home and abroad, her soldiers in all the ends of the earth, her sailors upon all the seas, her factories in ceaseless whirl turning out goods for the world, her ships going forth to bring from all peoples bread for her own homes, her multiplied industries upon her own island, and the labor represented in her ever-increasing communication with every nation under heaven mean almost unimaginable activity. And when the whole world is taken into account, when one tries to conceive how much toil is represented in the continuance of the race through each new day, one finds how impossible it is to do it any sort of justice. Every home in every civilized country lives upon the labor of the world, and the world it-

self is kept alive and going by a service that in its totality is simply inconceivable. And the greater part of this immeasurable service is done by insignificant persons. They have not the gifts, the education, the position, the wealth, or even the character that give conspicuousness. They are serving for the most part under compulsion and with a subdued protest in their hearts. They are indispensable to the world, and yet they do not, except in a limited number of instances, consciously share in the best religious life of the race. Tested by the Christian ideal, they are candidates for the highest things, they are adjusted to an endless and ever-extending opportunity ; but they have no distinct attainment in personal righteousness. What becomes of all these souls at death ? They did the world an indispensable material service while they lived, but they could not be described, by the widest latitude of meaning, as Christian men in faith and character. They did the world's drudgery, and for that the traditional view has no better reward for them than hell. They did the world's hardest and meanest work, and the Christian vision of the dead declares that they stand before God.

Then, too, what are we to think of the earlier races of man ? You may judge of the character of the dead by the character of the living. Of the fifteen hundred million human inhabitants of

the globe to-day, how few could be called great. Among the multitude of the clans and tribes and nations, how few are the individuals who share in the higher life of the world, in its science, its art, its faith, its best religion. Among the nominal Christians, how few are real Christians ; and when the serious and noble lives of the race are collected they form but a small company in the midst of the teeming millions. The present inhabitants of the globe are largely without the deliberate, cherished, rational love of righteousness. The race to-day the world over is still largely in its sin. This is the condition of the present generation, and on the whole as one travels away from the present toward the far-off morning of mankind the generations lose in moral attainment. At each step backward the noble lives become fewer, the earthly lives become more. You take a look into the nations that battered down the Roman empire ; you catch a glimpse of Carthaginian civilization, Assyrian, Babylonian, Egyptian ; you look beyond recorded history into the swarming and suffering populations that prepare the way for the great historic peoples ; you look still farther off and your vision disappears in barbaric hordes and groups of roaming savages. You sweep together from the four winds of heaven, and from the whole field of time, all the races of man since man appeared, and you

note two marks upon all, the possibility of endless growth and the almost universal moral failure. This is the tremendous total that to-day stands in the Christian imagination. The man who does not feel the magnitude of the problem here suggested is either inhuman or insane. What are we to think of this multitude whom no man can number, who have not washed their robes, who have not made them white in the blood of the Lamb? Have we no word from our Gospel for the overwhelming majority of mankind? Are the millions beside whom the total populations of all these Christian centuries, in all the world, are but as a drop in the bucket, of no concern to us? Does it in no way affect us that they came up as numerous as clouds of insects in the summer heat, struggled, suffered, lived, loved, and hoped and died? Does it not touch us that insignificant as they were, yet upon their labors and achievements the later civilizations rest? Does it not inspire us with pity to think that they, the primitive races, blazed a path for all their more highly favored brethren who were to follow them? Who can sweep up into imagination those early, barbaric, suffering, achieving, forgotten populations of the world, and look upon them in their vast aggregate, in their sin and shame, in their suffering and hope, without the deepest pity? This is the problem of the Christian seer to-day. By the

innumerable dead is his soul disquieted. They are unfit for moral bliss, they are too many for doom.

How great the words of the text become in the presence of our problem. About the dead children we have seen the comfort they bring to the bereaved parenthood of the world, and to the humanity of all. About the multitudes who are but children and about the childhood of the race; about the individuals and about the races that for thousands of years represent the infancy of mankind; about all the tribes and peoples and tongues that, with all their sins and crimes, have yet prepared the way for the fullness of time in which Christ came, the words of the mighty seer bring a like relief. They do not send them to heaven, nor do they doom them to hell. They simply lift the veil and show them standing before God.

2. The great vision beholds the dead swept up into the presence of God, — swept up into the presence of the Christian God. You can learn much about the noble business man from his business, but the best of him is not there. You can learn much about the character of a great ruler from his administration of public affairs, but the highest in him is not altogether there. You can gain refreshing glimpses of a high-minded leader in science from his discoveries, but the man is

greater than the scientist. You are thankful for the revelation of soul made to you by the poet, and yet you would like to know something more about him. The business man as a father, the ruler as a father, the scientist as a father, the poet as a father — the best of the man is there. Lincoln as a father, Agassiz as a father, Tennyson as a father, the highest in each comes to light through that great relation. All the justice, all the sympathy, all the sternness and all the pity, all the wisdom and love of the character are drawn to revelation here. The best man is at his best as a father. And so it is with God. We may learn a great deal about his intelligence and power from the study of the outward world; and the beauty with which nature overflows may lead us to think of the infinite creative passion for beauty in God. We may learn from the history of man yet deeper and more precious things about God. It is from history that the great generalization comes that God is the eternal power not ourselves that makes for righteousness. It is from history, immeasurably extended as it has been by evolution, that we see God working toward the production of the highest race, the race of man, and the highest style of man, the Christian man, and the highest form of society, the kingdom of God. Great, and rich, and wonderful are the things which we in all these directions may

come to know about God. But not until we come to our Lord, not until we see God as the Father of Jesus Christ, do we behold the highest in God. It is the order of God that man shall come to his best in fatherhood ; it is the order of God that he shall come to supreme self-disclosure in his Son.

We must therefore think of the dead as swept up into the presence, not of Infinite power merely, nor of Omniscient mind, nor of Eternal justice, nor of Moral will marching toward its own supreme ends, but of Ineffable Fatherhood. Power, wisdom, conscience, purpose, and moral might are all centred in and greatedened by fatherhood. The dead, small and great, stand before the God and Father of Christ.

3. And they are there for judgment. The context makes this plain. “ And I saw a great white throne, and him that sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God ; and the books were opened : and another book was opened, which is the book of life : and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works.”

The dead are before God ; they all are before the Christian God ; they are there for judgment according to their works. That judgment must be one of absolute honesty. All disguises must

disappear, all concealments must dissolve before the eye of the Eternal Judge. He must see us as we are, he must reveal us to ourselves as we are, he must deal with us as we are.

If we are honest we shall desire nothing else ; if we are not honest nothing else can do us any good. There is but one ultimately terrible thing, the possession of a dishonest mind, an unloving heart, an unfaithful will, an unrighteous life. That is really the only supreme evil in the universe. Nothing can avail us much while that is our condition. Wealth, position, power, fame are to an unrighteous soul but as luxuries by the bed of the dying. As was said of the President whom in 1881 the hand of the assassin struck down, "the stately mansion of power was to him the weary hospital of pain." An unrighteous life throws the universe into a habitation of woe. Honest men, therefore, see that what they need above all else is to be dealt with as they are. They need to be winnowed by the fan of God. The righteous and the unrighteous, the good and the evil, the wheat and the chaff, lie in them in the saddest confusion. They long to be made meet for the garner of God, and to that end they can pray for nothing other than that the winds of God may winnow them clean. The prayer of an honest man can be nothing less than this : —

“Search me, O God and know my heart :
Try me, and know my thoughts :
And see if there be any way of wickedness in me,
And lead me in the way everlasting.”

And the need of a dishonest man must be just this. He does not know how bad he is ; but he must be made to know it through suffering, through the terrible but righteous judgments of God. Nothing can do a bad man essential good but that which leads him to think upon his evil ways, to abhor them, to flee from them. The wicked man has one supreme need, emancipation from his wickedness. You may as well look for gentleness in a lion ravenous with hunger as to look for peace in an unholy soul. The bitter fountain gives forth bitter water, and the evil will is its own exceeding misery. It is so here ; it must be so everywhere. Judas hangs himself that he may escape from his misery ; but his misery lies in his character. He cannot escape from himself ; he was the betrayer of Christ before death, he is the betrayer of Christ after death. His need is not a change of place, but a change of soul. As the mirror gives back the image of the face presented to it, so the universe, here and still more hereafter, reports our moral likeness, tells the whole truth, and so long as we are in it thrusts upon us the sense of what we are.

And because this is our supreme need, the God

and Father of Christ deals with us as we are. He knows that unrighteousness is our woe, that righteousness is our infinite joy. His judgments are not the judgments of doom; they are the judgments of redemption. He judges that he may afflict, and he afflicts that he may save. His eternal intention must be to turn man through judgment from error to truth, from sin to holiness, from the godless to the godly life. As the light that falls upon the battlefield when the conflict is over, when the fierce passion has subsided, revealing the carnage and horror of war in the ghastly faces and mutilated forms of the dead, and in the anguish of the wounded, so falls the judgment of God upon man. Nothing is hid, everything is revealed, and in the great silent illumination of the Divine judgment, the awful forms of iniquity lie in complete exposure. Then follows the suffering; but is it necessarily hopeless suffering? Is it not necessary that in a Divine universe all moral pain should have behind it a redemptive purpose? We go too far when we say that that purpose must prevail; but can believers in the absolute goodness of God say less than that redemptive intention is at the heart of all moral pain? Surgery aims at the elimination of disease and the restoration of life. Surgery without anæsthetics, awful surgery aiming to cut out sin, and to raise the soul into holiness — that

must be the judgment of God. Even if we believe that the redemptive purpose of God must fail of complete sovereignty, we must still guard that which constitutes the greatness of the Divine judgment, its infinite kindness. It cannot be, in its intention, a sentence of doom ; it must be a chastisement in the interest of eternal life.

Thus much, then, we may learn from this vision of the dead. The dead are with God ; they are with the Christian God ; they are there for judgment because they need above all things else to see themselves as they are, and to be dealt with as they are. And shall we not leave them with God ? Shall we not leave them there with the assurance that he will deal with them righteously, that he will do all that the God and the Father of Christ can do to take them out of their sins and to lift them into holiness ? As I read the great Judgment Parables of our Lord, I feel the inexpressible seriousness of living, the absoluteness of moral law, the necessity for peace of an ethical faith fulfilling itself in human service, the awfulness of the selfish heart, the indefinite courses of fiery discipline that await the godless and the inhuman. But I cannot feel that the extreme interpretation of these parables is the true interpretation. I cannot here give the reasons for this conviction, but I can offer one line of suggestion.

One great difficulty with us, on these momen-

tous themes, is that we hear for others, and not for ourselves. The teaching of this sermon may seem too easy for a wicked world, its message from the Vision of the Dead may appear too considerate for an unrighteous race. And so long as we try our severe beliefs upon other people, like savages testing their terrible knives upon fellow savages, we shall never reach the mood to which wise conclusions are possible. We begin at the wrong end. For you who have stood by the grave of parents revered, and yet sadly imperfect; for you who have seen brothers and sisters borne from the home, young, beautiful, but unconfirmed, and hardly introduced to the divine life; for you who have lifted up the voice of sorrow over dead children infinitely dear, but all undeveloped, is the teaching in this sermon too good? Is it too full of opportunity for those who are gone, and too rich in consolation for you? Is the line of teaching here suggested at war with your conscience as the father of an erring boy who has forever gone from your sight? Is it a shock to your fatherhood to say that your poor boy is before God, that he is there to be judged according to his works, that he is there to suffer what no word or image can adequately express, but that behind all the judgment and all the woe is the Divine purpose that would still redeem him? Surely you do not ask for one line of teaching for

yourself, one sort of interpretation of Christ's supremely solemn words for the souls that are inexpressibly dear to you, and at the same time demand something different for other souls. Surely we must break up the habit of mind that hears first for the unknown, the unacknowledged, the unpitied masses of mankind; we must return to the mood that tests all teaching by its adequacy to our own human need and hope.

The ground upon which men are approved in the supreme Judgment Parable of Christ is Christian humanity. It is not penitence, but possession, beautiful, unconscious possession, that is the basis of the high award. Nothing in that scene of inconceivable solemnity counts but Christian character. Nothing is said about belief, about repentance, about enrollment in the church of Christ, about confidence in the sacrifice of the Lord and the forgiveness of sins. However great all these things may be, however essential to human heart and hope, they do not appear, they all are barred out from the Eternal Assize. There the supreme and only question is the possession of Christian humanity. Let the great words speak for themselves: "Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was an hungered, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and

ye gave me drink : I was a stranger, and ye took me in ; naked, and ye clothed me : I was sick, and ye visited me : I was in prison, and ye came unto me. Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungered, and fed thee ? or athirst, and gave thee drink ? And when saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in ? or naked, and clothed thee ? And when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee ? And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it unto one of these my brethren, even these least, ye did it unto me."

Now if the extreme interpretation is the true interpretation, if only those who give evidence, not to fond and partial friends, but to the all-seeing God, that they are in the spirit of Christian kindness, who can be saved ? Are we sure for our dearest dead, for our children, our brethren, ourselves ? Who is there, here or elsewhere, that comes up to the standard of beholding Christ, by implication of benign ministry, in the wrecks of human life ? We love our children, but we must admit that they are full of unworthiness, that often the law of Christian kindness is not in their tongue. We love them, and we thank God for them, and still we must confess that they spend much upon themselves, and oh, so little upon "these least" in whose anguish Christ makes his appeal. If, therefore, we are honest, we cannot escape the

feeling that our dearest are candidates for doom. We must face the horror that if destiny is fixed in this life, if failure to gain Christian kindness here determines the soul's condition forever, our children, by the multitude, are on the way to everlasting torment. If this is the truth, let us stand by it. If all destinies are decided by behavior on earth, and if failure to attain Christian humanity on this side of the grave means endless expulsion from the presence of God, let us be honest enough to apply the truth to our own souls, to our own children, to our own dead. Let us not be guilty of the ineffable baseness of claiming for ourselves what we think is too good for mankind, of mitigating God's judgments where our flesh and blood are concerned, and of allowing no similar mitigation where the race is involved. If the conception of everlasting conscious torment for failure to gain Christian humanity before death is the stern and terrible truth, let us be honest enough and brave enough to begin the application at our own homes.

Christ's teachings are for all his disciples the final authority. They should be read with the utmost earnestness and with the aid of all available good scholarship. Yet more should they be studied under the guidance of life. Let the devout old Christian read his Master's most solemn words with all seriousness and with abso-

lute honesty; but let him read with his grandchild on his knee. Let the disciple, accustomed to the extreme view of the future for those who die in sin, ponder the teachings of his Lord, but let him ponder with his family gathered about him. Let fatherhood, let motherhood throw its light upon the page; let brotherhood speak; let the humanity upon which the judgment parable turns be heard; let life in all its myriad interests lift up its voice. These are the commentators to which I beg you to pay the deepest heed; these are the interpreters that will save you from extremes; these are the guides that will conduct you to the vision of the dead standing before God.

Let us ever remember that the God who is a consuming fire is the God of love. Let us ever bear in mind that he can approve nothing but righteousness, that for this even on the part of the disciples of Christ there can be no substitutes. Penitence has no value for judgment; nothing but love can avail there. And if our own life would be insupportable were we forbidden to trust God for an endless opportunity to win through the Eternal Spirit his approval, we shall hardly dare to hold a narrower faith for our fellow men. We shall recall the fact that the supreme sin according to Christ is inhumanity. "Inasmuch as ye did it not unto one of these least, ye did it not unto me." Inhumanity is the

deepest rejection of Christianity; the denial of human rights, human worth, and human need means the denial of God. And with this as the centre of Christ's most solemn teaching upon the future world, however much we may be perplexed by certain aspects of that teaching, however much we may be tempted to run it out into a heaven and hell set in God's universe in eternal contrast, if we are wise we shall pause lest in our zeal for words we deny the Word, lest in our loyalty to Scripture we ignore man and scorn Christ, lest in our passion for Orthodoxy we repeat the awful sin of denying through our inhumanity the God and Father of Jesus Christ. First thoughts, surface readings, literal and isolated interpretations of our Master's teachings may place us among the supporters of the traditional Inferno; but deeper reflection, profounder study, wider and wiser interpretations will find in our Lord's words nothing in conflict with his great disciple's vision of the dead. The universe is swept up into the presence of God; the universe is shot through and through with his awful and absolute righteousness, with his eternal redeeming love.

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